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How 2 Gulf Monarchies Sought to Influence the White House

By David D. Kirkpatrick and Mark Mazzetti

(New York Times) -- A cooperating witness in the special counsel investigation worked for more than a year to turn a top Trump fund-raiser into an instrument of influence at the White House for the rulers of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, according to interviews and previously undisclosed documents.

Hundreds of pages of correspondence between the two men reveal an active effort to cultivate President Trump on behalf of the two oil-rich Arab monarchies, both close American allies.

High on the agenda of the two men -- George Nader, a political adviser to the de facto ruler of the U.A.E., and Elliott Broidy, the deputy finance chairman of the Republican National Committee -- was pushing the White House to remove Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson, backing confrontational approaches to Iran and Qatar and repeatedly pressing the president to meet privately outside the White House with the leader of the U.A.E.

Mr. Tillerson was fired last week, and the president has adopted tough approaches toward both Iran and Qatar.

Mr. Nader tempted the fund-raiser, Mr. Broidy, with the prospect of more than \$1 billion in contracts for his private security company, Circinus, and he helped deliver deals worth more than \$200 million with the United Arab Emirates. He also flattered Mr. Broidy about "how well you handle Chairman," a reference to Mr. Trump, and repeated to his well-connected friend that he told the effective rulers of both Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. about "the Pivotal Indispensable Magical Role you are playing to help them."

Mr. Nader's cultivation of Mr. Broidy, laid out in documents provided to The New York Times, provides a case study in the way two Persian Gulf monarchies have sought to gain influence inside the Trump White House. Mr. Nader has been granted immunity in a deal for his cooperation with the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, according to people familiar with the matter, and his relationship with Mr. Broidy may also offer clues to the direction of that inquiry.

Mr. Nader has now been called back from abroad to provide additional testimony, one person familiar with the matter said this week. Mr. Mueller's investigators have already asked witnesses about Mr. Nader's contacts with top Trump administration officials and about his possible role in funneling Emirati money to Mr. Trump's political efforts, a sign that the investigation has broadened to examine the role of foreign money in the Trump administration.

The documents contain evidence not previously reported that Mr. Nader also held himself out as intermediary for Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, who met with Mr. Trump on Tuesday in the Oval Office at the beginning of a tour of the United States to meet with political and business leaders.

A lawyer for Mr. Nader declined to comment. Two people close to Mr. Broidy said he had not been contacted by the special counsel's investigators. In a statement, Mr. Broidy said that his efforts "aimed to strengthen the national security of the United States, in full coordination with the U.S. government." He added, "I have always believed strongly in countering both Iran and Islamic extremism, and in working closely with our friends in the Arab world in order to do so."

The documents, which included emails, business proposals and contracts, were provided by an anonymous group critical of Mr. Broidy's advocacy of American foreign policies in the Middle East. The Times showed Mr. Broidy's representatives copies of all of the emails it intended to cite in an article. In his statement, Mr. Broidy said he could not confirm the authenticity of all of them, noting that The Times was able to show him only printouts and not the original emails.

A spokesman for Mr. Broidy has said he believes the documents were stolen by hackers working for Qatar in retaliation for his work critical of the country – a regional nemesis of the Saudis and Emiratis.

"We now possess irrefutable evidence tying Qatar to this unlawful attack on, and espionage directed against, a prominent United States citizen within the territory of the United States," Lee S. Wolosky, a lawyer for Mr. Broidy, wrote this week in a letter to the Qatari ambassador in Washington. If Qatar was not responsible, "we expect your government to hold accountable the rogue actors in Qatar who have caused Mr. Broidy substantial damages."

Forging a Connection

The two men first met during the crush of parties and other events surrounding Mr. Trump's inauguration. Mr. Broidy, 60, a longtime Republican donor and a vice chairman of the inaugural fund-raising committee, got his start in business as an accountant and then as an investment manager for Glen Bell, the founder of Taco Bell.

Mr. Nader, 58, a United States citizen born in Lebanon, previously ran a Washington-based journal called Middle East Insight, acted as an informal emissary to Syria under the Clinton administration, and, according to a short biography in the emails, later worked for Vice President Dick Cheney.

The two became fast friends, and by February, they were exchanging emails about potential contracts for Circinus with both the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia, and also about Saudi and Emirati objectives in Washington, such as persuading the United States government to take action against the Muslim Brotherhood or put pressure on its regional ally, Qatar.

Early in the Trump administration, the two men also noted with approval a successful effort to block a top Pentagon position for Anne Patterson, a former ambassador to Cairo whom the Emiratis and Saudis have long criticized as too sympathetic to the deposed Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood during his one year in office.

In one message to Mr. Nader in March 2017, Mr. Broidy referred to Secure America Now, an advocacy organization that he suggested had campaigned against Ms. Patterson, as "one of the groups I am working with." The two people close to Mr. Broidy said he had not raised money for the group or campaigned against Ms. Patterson.

The Saudis and Emiratis have had particularly warm relations with the Trump administration. Mr. Trump at times has appeared to side with the Arab monarchies against his own cabinet secretaries – including in the bitter regional dispute against neighboring Qatar. Also in concert with the Saudis and Emiratis, Mr. Trump has taken a far more hawkish stance toward Iran than either his cabinet or President Barack Obama, threatening to "rip up" the Iran nuclear deal that Mr. Obama brokered in 2015.

On March 25, Mr. Broidy emailed Mr. Nader a spreadsheet outlining a proposed Washington lobbying and public relations campaign against both Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood. The proposed campaign's total cost was \$12.7 million.

The two people close to Mr. Broidy said the plan was drafted by a third party for circulation to like-minded American donors, and that only some of its provisions were carried out.

Mr. Nader did, however, provide a \$2.7 million payment to Mr. Broidy for “consulting, marketing and other advisory services rendered,” apparently to help pay for the cost of conferences at two Washington think tanks, the Hudson Institute and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, that featured heavy criticism of Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Hudson Institute policies prohibit donations from foreign governments that are not democracies, and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies bars donations from all foreign governments, so Mr. Nader’s role as an adviser to the U.A.E. may have raised concerns had he donated directly.

The foundation said in a statement that it was approached by Mr. Broidy in 2017 seeking to fund a conference on Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood. “As is our funding policy, we asked if his funding was connected to any foreign governments or if he had business contracts in the Gulf. He assured us that he did not,” the statement said.

Documents show Mr. Nader’s payment was made by an Emirati-based company he controlled, GS Investments, to an obscure firm based in Vancouver, British Columbia, controlled by Mr. Broidy, Xieman International. A person close to Mr. Broidy said the money was passed through the Canadian company at Mr. Nader’s request, and the reason for its circuitous path could not be determined.

Documents also appear to show that lawyers for Mr. Broidy discussed with him a possible agreement to share with Mr. Nader a portion of the profits from the first round of business his company did with the Saudis and Emiratis – an apparent reflection of his integral role in helping the company, Circinus, negotiate for the lucrative security contracts.

In his statement, Mr. Broidy said Mr. Nader “is not a shareholder, officer, director or employee of any of my companies.”

“He has not been paid any origination fee or any other fees in connection with these matters,” he said.

Influential Links

Months later, as Mr. Broidy was preparing for an Oval Office meeting with Mr. Trump, Mr. Nader pressed him to try to line up a private meeting outside the White House between Mr. Trump and the leader of the United Arab Emirates, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, whom he referred to as “Friend.”

“Tell him that Friend would like to come ASAP to meet you SOONEST out of official site, in New Jersey” or Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland, Mr. Nader wrote to Mr. Broidy on Oct. 1.

“Again, Again and Again, please try to be the ONE to fix a date for Friend while you are there if at all possible,” he added.

Six days later, Mr. Broidy did just that, repeatedly pressing Mr. Trump to meet with the crown prince in a “quiet” setting outside the White House – perhaps in New York or New Jersey – according to a detailed report on the meeting that Mr. Broidy sent to Mr. Nader shortly after. Mr. Trump’s national security adviser, Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, blocked the request, Mr. Broidy reported.

Bloomberg

News Story

In a memorandum to Mr. Nader about the Oval Office meeting on Oct. 6, Mr. Broidy reported that he personally urged Mr. Trump to fire Mr. Tillerson, whom the Saudis and Emiratis saw as insufficiently tough on Iran and Qatar.

Later in the fall, Mr. Nader complained that the Secret Service had stopped him from getting his picture taken with Mr. Trump at a fund-raiser. Although the reasons he was kept at bay from the president are unclear, Mr. Nader pleaded guilty in 1991 to a federal child pornography charge and served six months at a halfway house after videotapes were found in his luggage when he arrived at Washington Dulles International Airport from a trip to Germany, according to court records released last week. In 2003, he received a one-year prison sentence in the Czech Republic after he was convicted there of 10 cases of sexually abusing minors, The Associated Press reported, citing a court spokeswoman.

Mr. Broidy was puzzled by the Secret Service's objections. Mr. Nader, in his capacity as an adviser to the ruler of United Arab Emirates, had met several times with senior administration officials in the White House during Mr. Trump's first weeks in office.

Mr. Broidy was apparently able to deliver: On Dec. 14, he emailed Mr. Nader his photograph grinning next to Mr. Trump.

Despite the close relations between the White House and the two gulf nations, there have been occasional hiccups, and in January, Mr. Nader twice emailed his friend with another delicate request: The leader of the U.A.E. asked that Mr. Trump call the crown prince of Saudi Arabia to try to smooth over potential bad feelings created by the book "Fire and Fury," by Michael Wolff. It portrayed the president's views of the Saudi prince in an unflattering light, Mr. Nader wrote.

"See what you can trigger and do and we can discuss more in person," Mr. Nader wrote, reiterating once again the "genuine desire" of the ruler of the United Arab Emirates to meet alone with Mr. Trump.

Days later, Mr. Nader wrote to his friend that he was looking forward to an upcoming trip to the United States. Mr. Broidy was arranging for him to attend a gala dinner at Mar-a-Lago, the president's Florida estate, to celebrate the anniversary of Mr. Trump's inauguration, and the two men were considering a trip to Saudi Arabia to try to sell the kingdom's young and powerful crown prince on a \$650 million contract with Mr. Broidy's security company.

But those grand plans were interrupted. It was on that trip to the United States that, as he touched down at Dulles Airport, Mr. Nader was greeted by F.B.I. agents working for Mr. Mueller.

David D. Kirkpatrick reported from London, and Mark Mazzetti from Washington. Kenneth P. Vogel and Adam Goldman contributed reporting from Washington.

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